

Suicides send shock waves through campuses

(CPS)—When a law student at a college in Boston took her life two years ago by swallowing a handful of pills, her family, friends and professors were stunned beyond words.

She had everything going for her: a supportive family and a brilliant future. But she was a high-achieving perfectionist who often felt overwhelmed by her life, though this was virtually unknown until some of her journals were found.

The law student and many like her are cases of "smiling depression," says a mental health expert whose speciality is college suicide.

There are some students, says Leighton Whitaker, director of mental health services at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa., who live in quiet despair, and who comprise most of the suicides among supposedly well-adjusted college students.

These are students who may appear to express themselves emotionally, but are only revealing a part of themselves. They are the "party animals," for instance, and others who wear a mask of cheerfulness while they hide how they really feel. Then there are others who are more forthright and come right out and say "I can't take it anymore."

That phrase is considered a "red flag" for college students who may be contemplating suicide, say mental health experts who watch students struggle with depression and despair.

The national college suicide rate continues to grow, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Driven by low-self esteem, isolation, substance abuse and withdrawal, about eight in 100,000 college students take their lives, according to a recent report by the Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, which studied 200 U.S. campuses.

However, being a college student may actually act as a

buffer for youth suicide. The figures reflect a suicide rate 50 percent less than their non-college peers in the 18-24 age group. "Most of the increase in the last three decades was due to an increase in youth suicide in general, and the vast majority of those were white males," Whitaker said.

The death of a student by his own hand has a chilling effect that sweeps across a campus, touching friends, classmates and professors alike, said Whitaker, and requires a process he calls "post-vention." The process includes grief counseling and public services for those who knew the deceased.

Whitaker strongly advises that survivors of a suicide not try to avoid the grief process, which may be assisted by counseling, as they may also become seriously depressed. "There is no more severe campus emotional issue than that of the suicide of a student," he said, noting that campus communities can be more tightly knit than small cities.

Some campuses consider student suicide prevention a major priority.

A rash of suicides during the 1991-92 school year at the University of Maryland's College Park campus prompted the administration to review mental health services and find ways to make support more readily available to students.

Eight students committed suicide during the year, which, according to the publication Campus Crime, is estimated to be triple the number that could be expected on a campus of 35,000.

The suicides did not appear to be related, but school officials say that it appeared the students were under severe stress because of personal problems and the fallout from budget cuts that disrupted campus life.

Since 1973, the United States Coast Guard Academy in

New London, Conn., has had a community-based suicide prevention program functioning within its ranks. In the years since the program was developed, more than 50 students have been treated for suicidal thoughts and severe depression.

Prior to 1973, the Academy lost four cadets and one faculty member to suicide in a five-year period. Since the program was set up, there has not been a completed suicide on campus.

New cadets are required to attend lectures, then take part in a discussion and watch a videotape that explores the problem of student suicide.

Juniors are given four hours of suicide prevention training which includes in-depth discussions of causes, myths, misconceptions and "red flags."

They watch videos and pledge to become their "brothers' and sisters' keepers."

Twice as many male college students succeed in killing themselves as female college students; however, studies reveal that females make many more suicide threats and attempts than males.

While the figures are tragic, they are more encouraging than the figures in the general population of the country, where four times as many males commit suicide than females.

For every male college student suicide, there are, on the average nationally, suicide attempts by eight other males, while an additional 12 men threaten suicide.

For each female student suicide, 58 other women attempt suicide and 145 threaten to kill themselves, according to research data in Whitaker's book, "College Student Suicide."

Whitaker, who often counsels students in distress, also cites the "machismo" role as one of the reasons twice as many male students take their lives than female students.

"The more 'macho' the man,

the more likely he will be involved in morbid behavior, which includes suicide and murder," Whitaker said. "These men are likely to avoid mental health services, although therapy can be a highly effective preventative for them."

The psychologist, who recently published a paper entitled "Machismo and Morbidity," said that, overall, college students engage in less macho behavior than their non-college peers.

Since mental health services are usually highly accessible to college students, there is an opportunity to prevent suicide that their non-college peers do not have.

Gun control is also quite strict on campuses, making accessibility to firearms more difficult than in other settings.

Young women who think about suicide, said Whitaker, are more likely to give adequate warning that they are distressed, and are more apt to see a counselor, two factors that can deter the act of suicide.

"The fact that women make more threats is positive in itself," he said. "They more readily signal that they need help."

According to Whitaker, alcohol is the single most overlooked risk factor for college suicide. "Societal denial of the physically and psychologically damaging effects of alcohol have allowed this drug to keep a sacred place."

Most student suicides usually are spurred on by heavy alcohol or drug use, even if just for an evening.

For example, Whitaker's study of 33 recent suicides on America's campuses revealed that 56 percent of those who succeeded in killing themselves were intoxicated with alcohol or another psychoactive chemical, while 65 percent were thought to have a history of diagnosable substance abuse.

For college students, prescription drugs are used to

Signs of depression

1. Sleep disturbances (inability to sleep or excessive sleeping.)
2. Lack of energy.
3. Changes in appetite (loss or increase in appetite.)
4. Substance dependence.
5. Deterioration of personal appearance.
6. Easily irritated or frustrated.
7. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.
8. Low self-esteem.
9. Withdrawn and preoccupied behavior.
10. Tendency to dwell on problems.

Source: "College Student Suicide" by Leighton C. Whitaker, Richard E. Slimak.

Suicide red flags

1. Giving away valued possessions.
2. Putting affairs in order.
3. Having difficulty adjusting to the loss of a relationship.
4. Withdrawing from all activities that previously gave the student satisfaction.
5. Crying with no apparent cause.
6. Sudden changes in behavior and/or attitude.
7. Inability to concentrate.
8. Constant irritability.
9. Excessive feelings of guilt.
10. Erratic behavior which cannot be explained.

Source: "College Student Suicide" by Leighton C. Whitaker, Richard E. Slimak.

commit suicide more often than "street" drugs. The most common method of committing suicide in the overall U.S. population is firearms, especially among males, but male college students are only half as likely as other males generally to use firearms.

Campus Events

READINGS AND LECTURES

Pulitzer Prize winning author, David Shaw, will lecture on "The Election 1992: The Press

and the Process," tonight at 7:30 in the HFA auditorium. Shaw is the media critic for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Joe Belth, a leading expert

in the insurance industry and professor of insurance at Indiana University, will speak Thursday at 3:30 p.m. in the Moyer Student Union, Room 201. The lecture is free and open to the public. For information call 895-3856.

Alfonso Ortiz, anthropology professor from the University of New Mexico, will present a lecture titled "Native Americans and the Columbus Quincentenary" Thursday at 7:30 p.m. in Wright Hall, Room 116. It is open to the public and free of charge.

Hans Herman-Hoppe will speak about "Economics and Politics of Succession" in the Moyer Student Union Thursday at 7 p.m. The lecture is sponsored by the Political Economy Club, Student Government and KUNV 91.5 FM. The event is free and open to the public.

WORKSHOPS

The Division of Continuing

Education will conduct a course to prepare for the Graduate Record Examination. The course will focus on building self confidence by reviewing the verbal, mathematical and analytical skills tested in the GRE. Dates include Nov. 14 and 21. Times vary. Call 739-3394 for details.

Polaroid Corporation and UNR's Reynolds School of Journalism are hosting a free Desktop Presentation Workshop which will demonstrate various systems for producing instant 35 mm slides and color overhead transparencies. Time include: 1-3 p.m. and 3-5 p.m. Thursday and 8-10 a.m. and 10 a.m. to noon Friday. For reservations call Mary Jo at 739-3788.

FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS

Nevada Dance Theatre will present "Eartha Kitt," the ultimate songstress, actress, comedian Sunday at 8 p.m. at Artemus Ham Concert Hall. The

gala is a fundraiser for the ballet company. Ticket prices are \$15, \$25, \$40, \$55 and \$125 which includes a special reception with Kitt following the performance. Tickets can be purchased at the PAC box office; UNLV ID required. For more information call 739-3838.

The International Film Series continues with "Mediterraneo" Thursday at 7 p.m. in Wright Hall, Room 103. Admission is free.

University Theatre presents "In Harmes' Way" in the Black Box Theatre of Ham Fine Arts. Show dates are: Thursday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday and Nov. 22 at 2 p.m.

The UNLV Jazz Ensemble I will perform Sunday at 2 p.m. in Judy Bayley Theatre. The concert will feature former "Tonight Show" trumpeter Snooky Young. Tickets are \$7 regular admission and \$5 for students, senior citizens and military personnel at the PAC box office. Call 739-3801 for more information.

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